

Laudato Si': A Catholic and Multi-Faith Conversation **Edited by Fletcher Harper and GreenFaith**

On June 18, 2015, the Vatican released Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si': On the Care For Our Common Home*. In addition to global media coverage, the encyclical evoked responses from Catholics and from people of diverse faiths worldwide. It quickly became the highest profile statement ever by a religious leader on the environment.

In September 2015, GreenFaith hosted two webinars: one featuring Catholic responses to *Laudato Si'*, and a second featuring responses from representatives of Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Protestant Christian traditions. The following represents a selection of the comments of each of the participants in the two webinars.

Dr. Jame Schaefer, Associate Professor of Theology, Marquette University

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis underscores Earth as a gift that God lovingly willed into existence. God loves all creatures; each creature--human, animal, and plants--and each ecological system is valued by God, and we should love and value them in themselves, apart from their usefulness to us. Love is the primary theme in this first encyclical dedicated to the ecological crisis and prevails throughout as the motivation for acting responsibly in the world.

Within this context of God's love and the human call to love, the Pope draws from the Bible to emphasize how we humans are interconnected with one another, other species, and Earth. They are all our "neighbors" in the most intimate sense. We humans are creatures among creatures, and our relationships with other creatures need to be cultivated. Pope Francis repeats again and again in his encyclical that everyone and everything is related, everyone and everything is connected, everyone and everything is interdependent. Moreover, we need to recognize that we humans are utterly dependent on other species, as well as the air, land, and waters, for our well-being. How we treat them has ramifications for the human species now, especially the poor and vulnerable, and for future generations. For Pope Francis, ecological problems are social problems, and the ecological problems he explores in *Laudato Si'* affect poor and vulnerable people most adversely.

He also clarifies misinterpretations and misunderstandings of the term "dominion" that appear in the Genesis 1 story of creation. Consistent with biblical scholars, he reminds us that dominion does not mean dominate, degrade, or destroy. Nor does dominion mean that we are lords and masters of God's creation. Instead, dominion is the responsibility God gives us that parallels the Genesis 2 story of creation, in which humans are told to take care of and preserve God's creation. There is no place in the Bible for any kind of tyrannical anthropocentrism, for arrogantly making all that exists revolve around ourselves in order to provide what we want individually or as a species.

Pope Francis urges us to value other creatures and systems of Earth intrinsically for themselves according to their natures, and to restrain ourselves in using them. He uses the

term “sobriety” to emphasize the need to restrain our consumption of the goods of Earth and to avoid wasting them. Overconsumption and wastefulness are prevalent today, especially in materially developed countries, and threaten a life-impooverished planet in the future.

That the visible world manifests God’s presence and tells us about God is a prevalent theme in the Catholic theological tradition, especially during the patristic and medieval periods. The visible world is God’s “book of nature” to be contemplated, and Pope Francis urges us to contemplate the world for signs of God. He wants us to be awed by the magnificence of Earth and the entire universe—the gifts that God made possible. He wants us to live in harmony with God’s creation and to cooperate with God’s creation as a way of cooperating with God.

In addition to the Bible and the Catholic theological tradition, *Laudato Si’* builds upon prior papal teachings. Much of what Pope Francis wrote in this epochal encyclical had been mentioned briefly by Pope Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI in their statements and encyclicals. Pope Francis also draws upon pastoral statements issued by bishops throughout the world. Additionally, he refers to other religious leaders who have inspired concern about threats to Earth, especially Eastern Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew who first characterized as sins acts that cause the extinction of species and degrade the environment.

Pope Francis addresses *Laudato Si’* to all people of all faiths, as one human family among many diverse creatures that constitute Earth—our common home. People of all faiths are needed to address the ecological-social problems that are ongoing and threaten a diminished and unsustainable planetary home. He also urges all people to move towards an inner and outer ecological conversion—converting from attitudes and actions that have been ecologically and socially destructive, to attitudes and actions through which we live in cooperation with all other species and systems of Earth in a splendid universal communion.

Our spiritual and religious approach to life is vital for this ecological conversion, Pope Francis insists. We must stop thinking that technology is the only answer to the ecological-social problems in which we are enmeshed today. Some technologies may help, but we need to choose technologies that enhance human dignity and the flourishing of Earth.

Dr. Pablo Canziani, Faculty member at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council in Buenos Aires, member of the Board of the Lay Department of the Argentinian Conference of Bishops

This encyclical really effectively brings back together science and the Catholic Church in the sense that it is the first encyclical in many years where all the arguments start from a scientific analysis. The encyclical basically reviews all scientific knowledge regarding the environment, and it does so in a simple and yet sound manner.

Some time ago, in March 2012, there was a very important scientific meeting in London where over 3,000 scientists from different backgrounds, from different perspectives and

religions and lifestyles met to discuss the state of the planet. The meeting was called “Planet Under Pressure,” and it was interesting to see how this encyclical converges on many of the conclusions that the scientific community reached in that conference. [Both the encyclical and that conference] concluded that we are all dependent upon each other, both the natural aspect and human aspect of life on this planet, and that we are interlinked and have to respect each other and all work together to solve all of the problems we have. Another suggestion from scientific research is that we have to learn to live with what we really need. That is one of the major lessons of the encyclical as well.

And while there are questions, as there are always with scientific issues, we know to a high degree of certainty what is going on, and what I find incredibly valuable in this encyclical is how the Pope doesn’t stay with a traditional breakup of science into, say, for example, meteorology and agriculture and then oceanography, but he tries pulling everything together by using state-of-the-art science. He also links science with social sciences in this encyclical, [showing that] we have to speak about social environmental issues and not just environmental issues or social issues.

Lonnie Ellis, Associate Director, Catholic Climate Covenant

The Pope advances some broader proposals for dialogue and action that would involve each of us as individuals and also affect international policy. There are three things he’s really calling us to here. He talks about honest dialogue, urgent action, and he wants deep solutions. He says we need a conversation that includes everyone and honesty. I counted at least six times in his encyclical that Pope Francis calls for honesty or an honest conversation when talking about climate change, and I think honest dialogue really acknowledges there’s a sense of a [scientific] consensus and moves towards solutions. That’s what honesty, I think, requires, and I think that’s why he needs to say that so many times in the encyclical.

He called us to urgent action. You may recall from the encyclical how many times he uses the words “urgency” or “without delay” or these kinds of words. He says fossil fuels, especially coal, need to be replaced without delay.

There’s a subject heading called “civic and political love,” which is such a great way of talking about political activism. His spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life. We need to redefine what the good life means, what it looks like. [He encourages] a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, capable of deep enjoyment [and] free of obsession with consumption. I’m a lay Franciscan, and one of the things we like to say is that the best things in life aren’t things. The Pope talks about a “rapidization,” [that] our lives have become more and more rapidly oriented, that we just schedule one thing after another. Then he really talks about how much simplifying our lives can lead to fuller lives actually, richer lives.

Maryann Cusimano Love, Associate Professor of International Relations, Catholic University of America

There are many times in the document where Pope Francis discusses the ways in which environmental degradation [has] led to conflict and endanger[s] peace.

He speaks about the four P's - care for the poor, our care for the planet, the impact of planetary and poverty concerns on real people, and the impact on peace. That's really not a surprise given his choice of Francis of Assisi as his name. He's telling us in this document, as he has been throughout his papacy, that we need to be like Saint Francis of Assisi, this man of poverty, this man of peace, this man who loves and protects creation. He says our economy kills, and...the people who are least responsible for both environmental degradation and climate change are the ones most hurt by those problems.

I had a chance this summer to go to Ghana and to see the front lines of climate change, a part of Africa that has been impacted by a very severe drought. Cardinal Turkson, who wrote a draft of *Laudato Si'*, who is an advisor to Pope Francis, is from Ghana. So in a sense I was following his footsteps and seeing what he saw in Ghana and the impact he was seeing climate change having, on people and on peace. The drought there has caused real food shortages. Crops are failing. They can't plant crops because of the drought. And when that happens, who suffers? The poor suffer the most, the small farmers who don't have enough to eat, women and children who are small farmers.

In Ghana, like in many other places in the world, there's a huge part of the population who are very young. 40 percent of the people in Ghana are under the age of 14, but they're not getting enough to eat. [These children], if that doesn't kill them outright, if they aren't dying right away from malnutrition, they're suffering throughout their lifetime from decreased growth, decreased cognitive development and impairment from the lack of vitamins and nutrition in their key formative months and years.

The conflict in Syria is an example [of suffering exacerbated by climate change]. The genocide in Darfur is an example of violence over land and water rights. We're also seeing an increased number of refugees as we see in Europe now, people fleeing conflicts, fleeing drought, trying to find access to water and food. The U.S. Department of Defense has determined that climate change is a security threat.

Francis is also saying that population growth alone is not the cause of these problems. Particularly (in the case of) of climate change, the areas of the world where the population is growing the most are not the ones producing greenhouse gas emissions. The countries that actually have a population decline are the ones who have been producing greenhouse gases and creating the problem of climate change. So he's saying often that [population] is a red herring to draw us away from the issue of consumption. The very poor are not the ones consuming the resources, and it's overconsumption of resources that's causing the problems.

Shaunaka Risi Das, Director, the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

Most Hindus will really welcome this statement from Pope Francis, very well thought through, very universal. Specifically on [the question of human identity in the web of creation from a Hindu perspective], unfortunately, there is a bit of an issue [for Hindus. In the West], since the Enlightenment, we haven't seen the individual so much as sacred, but more as human. We make laws and social policy based on the issues of human dignity.

From a Hindu perspective, being human isn't the all in all. Anywhere there is life, the energy of life, that unique spiritual energy is not considered a material energy. It's considered an *atma*. It's a different type of energy that has to be respected. So Hinduism pulls against any form of speciesism. [In the West, w]e have got[ten] used...to dignifying the human dignity as the greatest dignity, et cetera. In terms of true globalization, we will have to at some stage talk about this bigger issue of human dignity being the common denominator of public discourse.

Dr. Kathleen Deignan, CND, Professor of Religious Studies and Co-Founder of the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue at Iona College

I think Shaunaka [has] opened us up to our second theme or second set of concerns, which actually is Francis' way of talking about concern for all beings. But you note this Christian propensity to be selectively focused on humankind. Francis notes...how all created beings are interconnected to the degree of sharing the same DNA, and yet we give a privileged position to the role of the human throughout the living network of life in several special ways.

And perhaps, Rabbi Troster, you could talk about how your tradition understands the place of the human person in creation. Would you say that the human is superior to creatures? Or is the role to be protective? And we want to focus a bit on Francis' echoing of Pope Benedict's remark. Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship throughout the human sphere also harms the environment. So can you say something about that?

Rabbi Lawrence Troster, Rabbinic Scholar in Residence, GreenFaith

One of the things that I found so interesting and inspiring is how many of the sources from the Hebrew Bible that Pope Francis used, and how many of those same sources are found in Jewish environmental writing of the last 40 years. What you see is within the Hebrew Bible, there's more than one voice and more than one perspective on the human.

While...Jewish tradition has put the human as the steward of creation, being created in the image of God, [saying] that God has made us the caretakers of creation--given human power, [these things] have become in fact a reality. Nonetheless, there are voices within the tradition that move to a more biocentrist position--in Psalm 148, which Pope Francis quotes, also in the latter chapters of the Book of Job, and in certain parts of the mystical tradition as well, which understand that we are deeply embedded in what the rabbis called

the *seder b'reshit*, the order of creation. We are not separate from that order. We are part of that order. That should engender in us a sense of responsibility and humility.

Even if in our ethical systems we do give priority to human suffering, nonetheless, I think we must recognize that the destruction of the natural environment is inevitably going to cause injustice and destruction of the human environment. This is a modern idea that the Pope calls integral ecology, which I fully support as a Jewish theologian.

I think also one of the things that our traditions can give is hope, a sense of hope [in the face of the environmental crisis]. Through meditation and prayer, we can draw upon God for spiritual strength. We have a real opportunity to give people a sense of hope and a sense of purpose because of the moral element of this issue.

Ayya Santussika, Buddhist Nun and Teacher at Karuna Buddhist Vihara (Compassion Monastery) in California

From the Buddhist point of view, and I think this is shared clearly in the encyclical and with other traditions, our very life is dependent on our environment and on other living beings. That awareness of interdependency guides us to caring for rather than using up that which supports life.

Buddhism recognizes the good fortune of being born in the human form and having human capabilities because of what that gives us. We also recognize the responsibility and the opportunity to do good that comes with that. Buddha warned against seeing ourselves as superior to others. So I see in this beautiful letter of Pope Francis that we should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others, and we fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea what to do with their possessions. I think that's a very beautiful [section of the encyclical in which the Pope writes] that with disregard for human suffering, there's also a disregard for nature and for all the other living beings.

In Buddhism, there's this effort to cultivate compassion and caring. That caring extends to all of life. The first precept of Buddhism is to not take [the] life of any living creature. There were no exceptions, not for revenge or safety or anything else, and certainly not out of inconvenience or dislike.

[Given the urgency of the climate crisis], I would like to add that when we come to that moment where we feel discouraged, what we can realize is that in some way[s] we're clinging to a prior perception of how our collective human response to the climate crisis should play out. We're clinging to the requirements that we want a certain outcome. And if we let go of that clinging, and we turn our attention to our faith, we re-source ourselves through that faith and through our connection with one another and then act again, and we gain the energy to keep going, to avoid despair, to find new answers.

Kathleen Deignan:

Our next reflection concerns the number of times that Pope Francis articulates the principle of the common good throughout the encyclical. It's a very dominant theme, and he applies it in almost every single facet and feature of the human enterprise and this planetary enterprise. Can we speak about this principle of the common good from your tradition, and especially this notion of justice between generations, which we have to wrestle with?

Imam Zaid Shakir, Scholar and Co-Founder, Zaytuna College, Berkeley CA

In terms of the common good, there's a Quranic injunction, a direct command from the Almighty: Cooperate in all those things that are beneficial. So cooperation is something we're enjoined to do. It should be guided by mercy. The Quran describes the mission of Muhammad, saying, "We have sent you but as the mercy to all of creation." We understand that to mean literally all the world – it means the world of the humans, the world of the animals, the world of the insects. So this has clear ecological implications for us.

In terms of the issue of transgenerational consideration, again there's a saying that's very prominent in our tradition that "he or she is not amongst us who does not respect their elders and who is not merciful to their young generation." So the greatest act of mercy that we can convey to our younger generation is to leave them a livable planet, not a planet that's been ravaged by our greed and our appetites, but a planet that is green and lush and supports and sustains life and beautifies and adorns the life of all of its inhabitants, us ourselves as humans and other creatures.

I think [our actions can begin with] just a small level, from planting trees in our yard, fruit trees, other trees, to help replace what's being lost, engaging in organic gardening, and then forming alliances around those things, working with other gardeners and others who are interested in planting trees in public spaces, vacant lots--things of that nature, and then working up from there.

Ultimately...we have to consciously develop alliances that address issues such as those being spoken about, issues related to waste, extravagance, lifestyle changes, that we can all encourage in our communities, and then [move] beyond that to really address some of the major issues that are contributing disproportionately to the destruction of our planet.

In terms of not being overwhelmed, I think one of the advantages we have as people of faith is that we know that if we're with God and right with God, then everything is manageable. And after that I think we just have to see ourselves as raindrops. Individual raindrops come together, and eventually they form mighty rivers. So if we can just understand that no matter how small what we're doing [is], it might seem very small to us, but as it comes together with others and others and others, eventually it will form that mighty river that can be a force for positive change in the world, God willing.

Shaunaka Risi Das

On the issue of the common good, for Hinduism it's the whole issue of *dharma*. The word *dharma* from Sanskrit means to nourish, and it means to nourish the world around you. It's about service, and it's how you act in the world, and you (are meant to) act in a way that nourishes your environment, be that your family, your community, and obviously all the trees and plants and animals that surround it.

Before you eat every day, you're supposed to go out and make sure that no living being, no birds, deer, or whatever else might be in your area, is going hungry. It's a wonderful teaching. And it's very much intergenerational because you do it for absolutely everybody. It's my *dharma* to take care of my parents. It's my *dharma* to make sure that I have considered the principles necessary to be able to respect and love the world around me. So it's something that is actually passed down from generation to generation, a kind of understanding of how you act in the world.

Interestingly, in Hinduism this is not an issue of theism or atheism necessarily. It can be simply the issue of doing good. Everyone should do good, should do the right thing by the world they live in. But when you speak about it spiritually, it brings in an extra dimension because you would respect the world around you because it belongs to God. And every field you see is God's park. Every tree is part of God's domain, and you would respect it as such and cherish it as such. In developing your love for God, you develop your love for the world around you and the wonderful gifts that that world gives. Instead of detracting from the ecosystem, you would try to find your place within it, so that you can contribute meaningfully and relevantly, which could be a humble offering.

And it's not about science, and it's not about climate change. It's a bigger issue. The fact is we can respond to all these things. But how are we responding? It mightn't be very sexy to say that we should become a bit more renounced, or we should defer our selfishness or give it up altogether, or deal with issues of ego, but someone has to say it because these are the issues that cause the environmental problems. We are the problem. And who's going to say it, and who's going to address it? It is the faiths of the world that are saying these things. If we say it collectively, we have a much stronger voice.

Rev. Dr. Neddy Astudillo, Director of Latin American Outreach, GreenFaith; Co-Director, Angelic Organics Learning Center

I would like to also add the experience of a Latina immigrant into the United States. As Christians we realize that we are called to care for the land in which we live regardless of whether we are necessarily welcome or not in this country as immigrants, for example. But we do find inspiration in scripture, like in Jeremiah where the prophet speaks to those who are in exile and calls them to care for the trees, to plant trees, to eat from the fruit, and to marry and have children and to seek the welfare of the city where God has sent us into exile.

We recognize that we cannot achieve ecological justice without social justice. We cannot achieve social justice or human well-being without also achieving ecological justice and realizing what the Earth is going through. And in that relationship with the Earth, then we ask ourselves, what is the good news that the Earth is waiting to hear from us?

In the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 16, Jesus appears telling his disciples, now go and share and preach the good news to all creation. So somehow our journey with Jesus Christ needs to flow throughout the earth.

It is wonderful to see how our common Mother Earth is bringing us all closer together. We've grown separately as religions. It is wonderful that Mother is calling us to come together again. It's very important because I think we also heal ourselves as we do that. We bring voices that have been silent in society and in our churches in the past, indigenous voices, for example, who surprisingly have a lot to say to teach us how to listen to the earth with them. I think as we come together as religions and include the many voices, we all heal in this process. As a Latina living in the US, it's also a call to connect with my roots as Latin American. We're people of many races with lots of background, lots of wisdom within ourselves. So this is a special moment in all our lives.

Rabbi Troster

In traditional (Jewish) sources you definitely see the interconnection between moral behavior and not only the health of human society, but the health of the natural environment. You see this very often in the prophets who link the devastation of the Earth with immorality in society. For example, in Deuteronomy 11, God promises if (the Israelites) keep the covenant, then the land will have rain in its due season and they will have fertility. But if they don't, it won't.

Even if we do not directly connect the actions of God today with the way climate is changing, nonetheless, we actually know as a fact that humans can devastate the Earth with many of the extractive industries. In modern Jewish tradition we see this not as God punishing us, but rather God giving us responsibility for our actions. In fact we have learned that the Earth is responsive to our actions whether moral or immoral. And we have the ability to do what we call *tikkun olam*, the healing of the Earth, if we choose to do so.

Ayya Santussika

In Buddhism we're taught that there's no lasting happiness in material things. I know that we all know that. It's not just Buddhists. Everything that we acquire is impermanent and ultimately a source of suffering.

Acquiring doesn't fill that void within. Eventually we suffer from grasping after things. In this excessive consumption that we're engaged in in the world now, people are encouraged to buy things even when they don't have the money to do it. With that ability to purchase

and choose, there comes a false sense of individual power and freedom. This also winds up really being a huge disappointment, because it doesn't equate to real power and freedom.

So all of this intoxication with sensual pleasure and indulgence and gaining things, acquiring things, has a serious effect, as we all know, on the environment and on other people and cultures. So Buddha praised simplicity and having few wishes. And he praised renunciation, which is a word that a lot of people nowadays don't like. But it's coming from a misunderstanding of what renunciation actually is. (Renunciation is) the letting go of that which holds us down, and trading up to something that's much more satisfying, lasting, and supportive of our true life and happiness.